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CORRESPONDENCE

MR. BROOKS ON POETRY

To the Editor of the School Review:

MY DEAR SIR: In Mr. Brooks' article on "The Aesthetic Value of Poetry" in the November number of the *School Review* he strikes a note which will find an immediate echo in the minds of those who are interested in that side of education which directly promotes cultivation and refinement. It is a part we are neglecting, and a part that many parents think cannot be obtained in our public schools, where everything must first of all be practical. In reading Mr. Brooks' remarks on the teaching of poetry in the schools one is strongly moved to call "Hear! Hear!"

It is not necessary in these days to occupy time with a discussion whether or not it is desirable to teach poetry to children. Without such teaching they have been defrauded of much. It is the same with music and drawing, though the latter was a hard-won fight. The memorizing of standard poetry in the good old way is not only a first-class mental discipline, but, rightly taught, is a pleasure and delight in after life. We see the fruits of an early intelligent study of poetry in the scholarly mind of Dr. William Everett and the silver speech of the late Senator Hoar. The rare old gentleman who has the whole range of English hymnology at his tongue's end has seen the world with different eyes from him who never heard of Addison, Cowper, and Bishop Heber. He who knows the poets will always have a friend at hand with whom to enjoy the beauties of nature. The study of poetry directly makes for cultivation. How can the love of such study be taught?

The love of poetry or art or music is not taught by our modern methods. In fact, these methods are death to such love. Our children emerge from the process despising all poetry, and quite likely to announce that King Arthur wrote *The Idylls of the King*, and that Beowulf and the Vicar of Wakefield were the same. Our modern methods cultivate neither the love for poetry nor apparently the least real appreciation of it. The same may be said of our art-teaching, as far as pictures go. Our children leave their picture lessons tired and disgusted with the world's great masterpieces. What is the matter? It is this.

Let us take an example. "Snowbound" is taught in a class. It is the *cheval de bataille* with most teachers. In the first place, the poem has been annotated to death. Most of our literature books for school use have this defect. The old-fashioned boy could learn to enjoy Gray's "Elegy" without a note for every line to distract his attention. The boy in the "Snowbound" class, according to his age and section of the country, visualizes it, parses it, copies it, draws it,

diagrams it, paraphrases it, voices it, breaks up the rhythm, has a "language lesson" from it, puts it into "other words," and worse than all into his "own words." Having offered it every possible abuse, the poor, mangled thing is thrown aside, of no further use, and another "masterpiece" is brought out for treatment. This boy is sure to despise that poem with the utmost vigor of language ever after. Never, never will he read those tiresome words again, if he can help it. By this process a large proportion of the best things in poetry are utterly destroyed as far as their influence for refinement of thought and cultivation of ear goes. As Mr. Brooks argues, the perfume of the violet cannot be obtained by pounding the flower with a stone or analyzing its structure. It must be laid carefully on delicate sheets of wax. It is so with the aroma of poetry. Hard boiling over a quick fire will not do it. It is the wrong kind of process.

"We reached the barn with merry din
And roused the prisoned brutes within.
The old horse thrust his long head out,
And grave with wonder gazed about."

"Put it into your own words, John," says the teacher. No! No! We do not want John's words; we want Whittier's words. They are far prettier than John's and he understands them as they are. They are perfectly intelligible to any child. We do not want them turned into cacophonous prose. We want the music, the rhyme, the jingle, the accent, the prosody. Let John try his hand at putting some of his "own words" into rhyme, if necessary, but let him remember this poem as it is. We do not want the picture cut up and patched together differently. Under ideal home conditions John will hear the whole of "Snowbound," not a part by the fireside, on a snowy winter night. Ten to one John will say: "That was good about about the barn, wasn't it!" Just so the children who "sit up till ten" every Christmas Eve to hear their mother read "Christmas Carol" will learn to love the words of the gentle lesson better every year. So also with the swing of "Ring Out, Wild Bells!" which children will learn to like, without elaborate explanations. There never was a boy yet who did not like the *Iliad*, if properly presented to him. We cannot have home conditions in the schools, but can there not be a little of that atmosphere in our poetry-teaching?

Or take the other method of the odious "excerpts" now put into the hands of children to save time. What kind of an impression does this sort of hodge-podge produce? Not the love of poetry. It does no good in the cause of education. The head of Milton's "Lycidas" does not fit the tail of "John Gilpin," and yet that is what the boy often attempts to accomplish. The sight of a composite flower part turnip and part rose is not pleasing, nor would it assist the study of botany. And the "Memory Gems!" Who that has heard these jewels recited in the average classroom can forbear a smile at the remembrance. They are forgotten as soon as learned.

It is the same with modern "picture study" in connection with the work in drawing. One scarcely knows whether to be merry or sad over the deplorable results of some of this teaching. There is certainly no surer way to make children

loathe pictures than this. Our schools are filled with beautiful photographs and casts. Are their beauties allowed to sink in silently? By no means. Is their subtle influence for the bettering of the sense of beauty and the wish to create it allowed its perfect work? Not at all. These pictures must be "taught." The hardest-worked picture in the schools is the Sistine Madonna. It is safe to say that nine children out of ten come out of school with a thorough scorn for it. All enjoyment has forever departed. Even the sight of it in the Dresden Gallery will be a bore to them later, if they tell the truth. We all know these school pictures: "The Gleaners," "The Windmill," "Cattle Plowing," "The Shepherdess," etc. And the cast of St. George! Does he become the boy's ideal? "I'd rather be Bob Fitzsimmons than that old prig," says the boy who has been "taught" that cast.

The facts are to be deplored. Cannot teachers find a remedy? Is it impossible to give our public-school children a real love for poetry and a genuine, if limited, appreciation of the beautiful in art?

MARY FIFIELD KING.

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SECONDARY SCHOOL FRATERNITIES NOT A FACTOR IN DETERMINING SCHOLARSHIP

To the Editor of the School Review:

DEAR SIR: By the accompanying diagram I have attempted to show the relation in the Lewis Institute of Chicago between fraternity membership and scholarship. I have not investigated the influence of sorority membership on scholarship, the "boy problem" being capable of independent solution, at least so far as membership in secret societies is concerned.

The Lewis Institute is a "polytechnic school for both sexes," charging a quarterly tuition fee of twenty dollars. Established in 1896, it now has an attendance of about one thousand students in the day school. It is located on a busy street in the midst of small stores of all kinds. The influences that here affect student life are practically identical with those operating in the average city high school. That the tuition fee does not make it an exclusive school is proved by the fact that all grades of society are here represented.

My method of investigation has been as follows: I first made a list of all fraternity students who had attended the Institute for nine successive quarters, beginning with the first. I found sixty-one of such students. Only thirty-five of these sixty-one completed the full twelve-quarter course. I averaged all the grades of these sixty-one for the first quarter, and found a general average of 79.36. I then selected sixty-one non-fraternity students whose general average for the first quarter was also 79.36. The average student of one group was then similar to the average student of the other group in all respects except fraternity relationship. Both groups, fraternity and non-fraternity, started even at the beginning of the second quarter. I then calculated the general average of each group for